

# Thompson House Centenary, 1885 – 1985

J H D Millar

Address given at the Centenary Celebrations of Thompson House.

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The 'Thompson Memorial Home for Incurables', now Thompson House, was completed and ready for the admission of patients in February 1885. This very fine building in the Queen Anne style stands on the Magheralave Road, Lisburn, nearly opposite the Friends' School. It is a memorial to William Thompson Esq, MD, FRCSI, born 7th March, 1806. He had been surgeon to the County Antrim Infirmary, Seymour Street, Lisburn, for many years and was killed in an accident on the level crossings at Dunmurry on the 22nd September, 1882. His house stood where the Fire Authority is now situated and his memorial and grave are in the graveyard of Lisburn Cathedral. By law he had been compelled to discharge from the Infirmary all patients considered incurable. He had frequently expressed the pain it gave him to comply with this enactment, and deplored the absence of some asylum to which such persons might be sent.

His widow Rosina Thompson, his daughter Mary Hogg Bruce and son-in-law James Bruce, JP, Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Tyrone, agreed to allocate the sum of £60,000 (about £1 million by present day value) of the assets from the estate of Dr Thompson to build and endow a home for incurables. On the 5th May, 1883, the above founders bought a nine acre site for the Home from Sir Richard Wallace for £901 in the townland of Lisnagarvey, Blaris Manor of Killultagh, Barony of Upper Massereene. Sir Richard Wallace, of Wallace Collection fame, was MP for County Antrim from 1873 to 1884 and had made many generous gifts to Lisburn, but none compared with the munificence of the Thompson bequest. Sir Richard leased and lived in Antrim Castle and travelled by private train to and from Lisburn. It is very likely that the Thompson family attended parties given at Antrim Castle by Sir Richard. The architect of the new building was Mr G Ferguson and the contractor Mr Robert Corry, both of Lisburn. Mrs Thompson was able to visit the work in progress before her death on the 8th December, 1884. Her daughter Mrs Bruce gave a further £10,000 in memory of her mother. The Bruce family maintained a very close personal interest in the management of the Home and the welfare of the residents. Mr M R Bruce of Corriewood, Castlewellan was president of the Board of Management when the Home was finally taken over by Antrim County Council in 1963.

The first Trustees were John Blakiston Houston, JP, DL, Henry Shaw Ferguson, MD, Canon William Dawson Pouden, Ogilby Blair Graham, JP, James Theodore Richardson, JP, and Henry Jones McCance, JP. They were responsible for the land and building, also endowments of £38,000 and any further money and its proper investment. A General Committee was formed consisting of 27 well-known persons from the Lisburn and Belfast areas. No ladies were to serve on the General Committee apart from the surviving founder, Mrs Mary Hogg Bruce. A Board of Management was appointed by the General Committee to

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supervise day-to-day management and at least five ladies were to serve on the Board of Management. Dr George St George was appointed medical officer and Dr Samuel Musgrave and Dr H S Ferguson accepted the office of honorary physicians to the Home.

It is not clear how many patients were originally admitted but when the Home was taken over by the Antrim Health Committee in 1963 there were 60 residents. The Home was to be 'devoted to the care of the respectable poor suffering from incurable disease and shall not be available for persons whom the Board of Management might think ought to be treated in the workhouse hospitals, nor for those who are in comfortable circumstances, nor for idiots, or persons of unsound mind, nor for persons under sixteen years of age. Applicants having small means of their own, but not enough to support them comfortably, shall be eligible for admission to the Home; the Board of Management may stipulate that they contribute to their support'. Under certain circumstances full paying patients could also be admitted.

One of the bye-laws stated that 'patients should have been a resident for five years in one or more of the Counties Antrim, Armagh, Londonderry, Down, Monaghan or Tyrone. The Board must also be satisfied that no applicant is a person of bad character'. The religion of the applicant was in no way to be taken into account and the Institution was to be strictly non-sectarian.

About 1960 when Major Charles Blakiston Houston was chairman, the endowments could no longer cover the cost of upkeep and it was decided to make a small charge to the residents. Approaches had been made to the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority without success but in January, 1963, the Antrim County Council took over the responsibility of the Home with endowments of £80,000.

Considerable renovations and improvements were carried out by the County Council costing, together with furniture and equipment, some £170,000. Work was completed in 1967 and the Home, thereafter called Thompson House, was formally opened by the Governor, Lord Erskine of Rerrick, on 9th October, 1967.

The County Medical Officer, Dr W Bamber, made it clear that the traditions of the Home should be continued and that persons admitted to Thompson House should be chronically handicapped patients in the younger age groups. A small sum was set aside to honour the founder's wish concerning the eligibility of residents of County Monaghan.

I am much indebted to Dr J S Y Mathewson for the following:

'I joined the late Dr J G Johnston, MC, as an assistant in 1954. He had, I believe, been Medical Officer to Thompson Home for many years prior to that date. I well remember my first visit there with him. The notice at the entrance gates read "Thompson Memorial Home for the Incurables" — not a hopeful sign for the residents! I was introduced to the Matron, Miss Duffield and the two nursing sisters, Miss Kelly and Miss Taylor. We all accompanied Dr Johnston on his ward round. The residents were mainly elderly and quite a number were bedridden. The wards were scrubbed wooden floors and there was an open fire in each of them. This gave a cheerfulness and homeliness to the wards, but of course caused a good deal of work in carrying the coal upstairs and in dusting the wards. Dr Johnston was a life-long admirer of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan and I remember him rendering a chorus from *The Mikado* in one of the wards on that visit. The residents were well cared for, but of course the standards did not compare with those of to-day. Patients were treated there until they died and I do not recall anyone being transferred to another hospital for further treatment. Some of the residents I remember well, in particular Miss Maggie Moore, Miss Florence Walker and Mrs Mary Bell. I am delighted to say that Mrs Mary Bell who was a resident before I came in 1954 is still a resident with us today.

'I remember that each Christmas morning the Lisburn Silver Band came to play on the driveway outside the Home as they still do. Dr Johnston and I attended and helped to carve the turkeys and hams. We also helped to serve the residents.

'The number of residents gradually diminished over the succeeding years and in 1963 the County Antrim Health Committee was asked if they would be interested in taking over the running of the Home. There were numerous meetings with Mr Robinson, Chairman, Mr Penington, Secretary, Dr Bamber, Medical Officer, and Miss Massey, Nursing Officer, and finally they agreed to take it over and to rename it Thompson House. The future residents were to be under 55 years of age and to be physically handicapped. This having been decided, the building was closed for renovations. All residents were dispersed to other residential homes and geriatric wards with the promise that they would be taken back into residence when the alterations were complete. The promise was kept. Miss Russell was appointed Matron and when she resigned in 1972 Mrs E King, our present Nursing Officer in Charge, was appointed her successor. Thompson House soon became filled with the young handicapped. Many of them were suffering from multiple sclerosis and the local Multiple Sclerosis Society soon began to take an active interest in the residents'.

On April 1st 1975 Thompson House was taken over by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and designated a hospital. In 1976 Dr Taggart, Chief Administrative Medical Officer, Eastern Health and Social Services Board, asked me if I would act as visiting consultant which I was pleased to do until my retirement in 1982, when I was succeeded by Dr Michael Swallow.

Thompson House Hospital now has 53 beds which are constantly occupied. Over the last few years there has been a move towards introducing more beds for holiday relief and some beds for medium term rehabilitation. The two purpose-built chalets in the grounds provide excellent training in aspects of daily living for patients who are expecting to be discharged home. About 40% of the residents suffer from multiple sclerosis, some 15% from the effects of trauma and another 15% from strokes. Other conditions include cerebral palsy and rheumatoid arthritis. About two-thirds of the patients are under the age of sixty and patients are not generally transferred when they come into the geriatric age range.

There is a well-trained nursing staff under the Nursing Officer, Mrs E King, and Sisters E Walsh and R M McStay. In addition there are two part-time physiotherapists and an occupational therapist. The social worker and speech therapist visit as necessary. The voluntary organisations make substantial contributions to the comfort and welfare of patients, helping with visiting and outings. These include the Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Chest, Heart and Stroke Association, the British Red Cross and the Lions' Club. The 'Friends of Thompson House' have recently been formed and help with outings, picnics, and barbecues and contact with local organisations for the disabled. The hospital has a small bus and most patients go on holidays in the summer, often accompanied by members of staff and even their families. Art therapy sessions were introduced in 1984 and have proved very popular. Musical entertainment is provided by many local groups, choirs, bands and visiting professionals. Dr Swallow sometimes plays the piano for the residents on his weekly visits.

Thompson House can be proud of its past and present achievements and will continue to strive to create a stimulating and caring environment for younger people with severe physical handicap.

I wish to thank Dr P M Darragh, Eastern Health and Social Services Board, for his help in finding the legal documents regarding Thompson House.

#### REFERENCES

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